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November 2016

Weak spots

Repairing what is broken

Meeting God in grief and hope

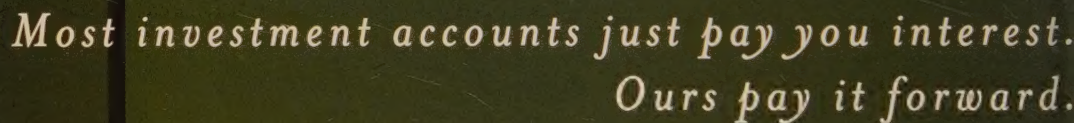
The cross gets in the way

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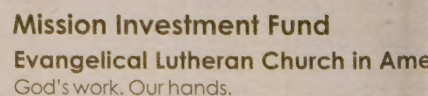
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PAUL AND THE POWER OF FAILURE

VOLUME 29 NUMBER 9 NOVEMBER 2016

God's power is made perfect in weakness, freeing us from fear of failure.

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In this month's cover illustration by Chelsea Stephen, the repaired pot represents how God turns our weakness into strength.

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VOICES

The power in failure

by Elizabeth Hunter

Who among us enjoys

failing? I sure don't. Sometimes my failures have been relatively minor, like the time I burned the stew.

The most bitter failures have been times I've failed my family or myself. While struggling to balance various roles and responsibilities, I've seen myself fall short in one area or another.

Perhaps you, too, can relate to writer Abby Accettura ("Weak spots," page 6), who says today's social media networks allow her to "bury the [ugly] parts," "hide my failures" and "edit my mistakes." But hiding failures isn't something we need to do. As Christians, we can "rely on the idea that the things we lack are made up for by God," Accettura writes.

Like many of our November authors, I've had to accept my strengths as well as my weaknesses. Several years ago I mourned my failure to be a good godparent to far-away godchildren. Then it hit me: other people struggled with the same issue—not just godparents but grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and more. Out of this came *The Little Lutheran* and *The Little Christian*, magazines published 2007–2015 that helped teach thousands of young children about the Christian faith. Here was God, turning what I thought was unredeemable weakness into blessed strength.

Yet "this weakness thing is tricky," columnist Catherine Malotky writes ("Amen!" page 42). She challenges us to consider whether bullying behavior, wealth or privilege make us powerful, or whether other things such as hospitality,

courage, commitment, forgiveness and patience give us more strength.

In this month's Bible study, we can see that the apostle Paul learned these lessons—just as we do today. Before his life-changing encounter with Christ, Saul approved of the killing of Stephen and watched over the coats of those who were stoning Stephen to death—lest those coats be stolen. Here is abuse of authority and failure at its worst: our failure to see the divine image in another child of God. Yet God turned Saul's life of persecuting others around, reforming him into Paul, one who would tell people in many different lands about Christ, encouraging them to keep that same Christian faith he once tried to destroy.

Honesty and vulnerability are important to model for our children, Julie Seymour writes ("Resilience," page 34). When we don't acknowledge our mistakes in front of our children, they miss opportunities to learn resilience and perseverance. Prayer, reading the Bible, service and participating in congregational life all take practice, she says, adding that "the more children see the adults around them practicing these things—including admitting to failure—the more resilient they will become.

As Bible study author Meghan Johnston-Aelabouni writes, we're called to be faithful; not perfect. As author Karla Craig reminds us, the cracks add to our beauty. And as Scripture shows, God's love and mercy make life worth living despite our mistakes. 🌿

Elizabeth Hunter is editor of *Gather*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Faythe's Footprints

by Valora K Starr



Faythe Kalkwarf

I have been blessed to

meet many people over the years. Now I'm at a place in life where it feels like I am bidding farewell to just as many people. Whenever I hear that someone has died, I say a prayer of thanksgiving for their life, for our lives together and for God who has welcomed them home.

Over time I decided to write the names of these loved ones in a small journal in preparation for the coming All Saints Day celebration. I also spend some time mourning the physical connection that is lost. And I cry to wash clean any remaining sadness and make way for memories. But recently I felt that these rituals of grief and remembrance still seemed to be missing something.

Faythe Elizabeth Kalkwarf joined the church triumphant July 5, 2016. I had not seen or spoken to Faythe in years. When I heard that she had died, I instantly pictured her face. Memories flooded my heart. I said a prayer of thanksgiving for her life.

Faythe and I met when I joined the national staff of the American Lutheran Church (a predecessor of the ELCA) in Minneapolis. Then I worked in youth ministries. Faythe served as vice president of the American Lutheran Church Women (ALCW). The church was struggling to become diverse, and I was a long way from my home and my African American community. In those first few years, I had to learn to find the familiar in new places, and Faythe reminded me of my mom.

Whenever the women were meeting

in the national office, I could count on Faythe to find me for that mama hug. She would hold me by the shoulders in that "let me look at you" fashion and assure me that I was in the right place. For me, this was about more than Faythe's role as a great mom, pastor's wife, church musician extraordinaire, woman of deep faith and leader of women. It was about more than Faythe's serving as one of the midwives God used to accompany Women of the ELCA through its birth. It was about more than her part in helping to create the poetry that became known as our purpose statement. She even set it to music, so that we could sing a new song as a community of women. Faythe—encourager, cheerleader, teacher—would always mention how much she appreciated something I had done or written. I thought of all of this as I wrote "Faythe Elizabeth Kalkwarf" in my book.

Later, at Faythe's celebration of life service, I listened as her son, Jonathan, repeated his mother's advice to "always stay humble and kind." At that moment I realized what was missing from my prayer and journaling practice. It was time to look at the footprints she'd left on my journey. As we wind down another year of violence, mass shootings and racial tension with no solution in sight, her oft-repeated words, "always stay humble and kind," are just what I need to feel, not helpless, but hopeful.

Thank you, God, for the gift of Faythe.



Valora K Starr is director for discipleship for Women of the ELCA.



SWEAKS



THE BEAUTY IN THE VULNERABLE

by Abby Accettura

I had been living in Paris for about two months before the weight of it finally caught up to me.

I was studying abroad, finishing my French minor through a program at another university. I'd gone alone—determined to prove my independence, my self-sufficiency. I wanted to see the world, and I wanted the people at home to watch me do it, successful and proud and on my own.

By all accounts, I was thriving. My Facebook was a constant stream of pictures, historical sites, and museums and cathedrals. Every status and blog post recounted my adventures. I was happier than ever, exploring one of the greatest cities in the world with total confidence, eager to show off my discoveries.

Reality told a very different story.

In the city of love, I found myself lonelier than ever—separated from my friends and family and isolated by a language barrier I wasn't skilled enough to breach. In the gastronomic capital of the world, I found myself losing pounds by the day—too embarrassed to order food in my obvious American accent, too anxious to eat anything I managed to find. In a country famed for its beauty, the February rains washed everything a dull grey that made my insides ache and my throat tighten.

I struggled to keep up the image of perfection, convinced that by cultivating a version of myself that was happy and successful, I would eventually become her.

Two months into my semester, I finally cracked.

I was living in a dormitory, the Fondation des États-Unis, where the walls were thin at best. I'd spent my first two months struggling to be invisible, listening for movement in the halls before sneaking to the

bathroom, avoiding contact with strangers who might see me in my living space, in the ruins that weren't masked by the makeup and the smile I took outside.

That night, I was too broken to care. The sadness, the loneliness, the terrible aimless void that

was my life in this new place—it came out in a howl. I sat on my bed sobbing, my whole body shuddering, my voice battering against the windows and the walls. I cried so loudly that when the knock on my door came, I almost didn't hear it.

Almost.

The rap of knuckles on wood stopped my crying mid-wail. I froze. For a horrifying second, I thought the door would open—that somehow, for the first, most ironically inopportune time, I'd left the door unlocked, and any second the face of some well-intentioned stranger would appear in the doorway and shatter the glass of the funhouse mirror I'd been using to warp and twist my weakest, most pathetic, most vulnerable self into something presentable.

But a face never came.

Instead, a single sheet of paper slipped in through the crack under the door.

"You've sounded upset lately. If there's any way I can help, let me know."

—Your next door neighbor.



ACKNOWLEDGING MY FEAR

The word "vulnerability" genuinely twists my stomach. Even the thought of allowing the world to see me at less than my best, my most put-together, my most competent, makes a knot of anxiety tighten inside me, and I have to breathe through my nose to shake it off.

In many ways, I think that today's social media networks allow me to coddle that fear. Through Facebook,

Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr, I can show the world exactly the version of myself I want to be. I can curate an image of my life that makes me seem a product of only my best experiences and highest achievements.

I can bury the parts of me that are ugly. I can hide my failures. I can edit out my mistakes.

That kind of curation comes at a price. Vulnerability and authenticity share many of the same traits. But for a long time, that was fine with me. It seemed like a decent bargain—to be beautiful and less-than-real, rather than pathetic and myself.

But even unreality has weight. Masks grow heavier the longer we bear them, and without the tether of our own humanity, the vast chaos of the world can bury us.



JESUS, OUR ANCHOR

One of my favorite images of Jesus is the cornerstone. “Therefore thus says the Lord God: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: One who trusts will not panic’” (Isaiah 28:16).

I love that picture. I love the idea that Jesus is an anchor, a fixed point—a steady, unchanging pillar. It’s a comforting image in the storm of my own humanity, when my weaknesses sink pits in my own foundations.

And it’s supposed to be a comfort. We’re supposed to take solace in God’s perfection, in God’s immobility. We’re supposed to rely on the idea that the things we lack are made up for by God.

The biggest step, I think, is learning to actually rely on that, instead of clinging to the idea that we can make up the difference ourselves.

I fall into that trap constantly. I am obsessed with the idea that I can do and be everything at once. The way I cull my life down to the highlights and publish them for the world to see—among so many other things, my Facebook page is a testament to my own mistrust, my refusal to rely on God.

Yet Jesus’ life on earth gives us a perfect model for that kind of faith. Jesus in the Gospels is the epitome of vulnerability—from a human baby in the wilderness to a broken man on a cross. His total acceptance of his human form and his reliance on God for guidance—Jesus’ example teaches us how to be vulnerable and how to rely on God for the strength we don’t have in ourselves.

When we refuse to acknowledge our own weaknesses, we refuse the comfort and the stability that God wants to provide. When we reject our own vulnerability, we distance ourselves from the anchor that’s already been given.



VULNERABLE AND AUTHENTIC

The boy who lived next door to me in Paris wrote me notes every day for a week before I actually met him in person. He let me hide in my room and slip notes back under his door for seven whole days before I had to face him.

And when I finally did meet him, all he did was smile and say hello.

The sky didn’t fall. The earth didn’t open up and swallow me. Someone heard me crying, saw my face knowing that I’d made those sounds, understood that I was weak and scared and homesick. Someone saw me at my most vulnerable, and the world didn’t stop turning.

Jesus offers us a chance to be vulnerable. To be authentic. To be ourselves—our ugly, flawed, broken selves—and still be safe and loved and protected. He teaches us to have faith in the strength and certainty of God without taking on the burden of impossible imitation. God, through Jesus, extends grace so that we can be what we are—less than perfect and no less loved.

Abby Accettura is currently pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in screenwriting at DePaul University in Chicago.



LET US PRAY

Yearning as prayer

by Julie K. Ageson

Newly settled in a large

city, my husband and I found a congregation with an interesting website and a reputation for ecumenical partnering—not just any partnering, but an established parish serving both Lutherans and Catholics. So on a warm Sunday morning in September, we set off to find this community.

A nearly full parking lot should have been a clue that the worship time on the congregation's website and sign hadn't been updated lately. Finding a space to park, we walked suspiciously alone up the curving sidewalk accompanied by loud and exuberant singing pouring from open windows: "Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness. Christ, be our light! Shine in your church gathered today." We slipped into the nearest pew—noting several turned heads and sets of eyes watching with amusement—and quickly joined our voices to theirs: "Longing for peace, our world is troubled, longing for hope, many despair ... Longing for shelter, many are homeless, longing for warmth, many are cold. Make us your building, sheltering others, walls made of living stone" (*ELW*, #715).

Here was the familiarity of a hauntingly beautiful hymn about justice and peace, a gathering of unfamiliar faces, the belonging and the not belonging. Just as we'd ratcheted up a few volumes more of "Christ, be our light," it was over. The closing hymn bookmarked the end of worship. Slightly embarrassed, we shook a few hands, heard apologies for

the church's incorrect worship time and accepted sheepish invitations to come back an hour earlier next week.

The yearning remained. For us, of course, it was the missed experience of Sabbath worship, the desire to be connected to a community, a sense of being in a time warp and our unfamiliarity with the lay of the land.

For this Lutheran-Catholic parish, the yearning is a 20-year long affirmation of being the body of Christ together. Their yearning is a weekly witness to embrace one another and all who long for God's face together, making a home for Lutherans and Catholics in spite of the separations of 500 years. They long for unity, and they have created an extraordinary model for re-membering the body of Christ.

We visited again a few weeks later. The priest who gave the homily spoke longingly about the transformative power of women's leadership. A pianist who happens to be Sikh was filling in that Sunday. He accompanied a rousing liturgy, and we received the bread and wine of the Eucharist at a table hosted by a female Lutheran pastor and, yes, a male Catholic priest.

"Many the gifts, many the people, many the hearts that yearn to belong. Let us be servants to one another, signs of your kingdom come ... Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness." This, this is yearning as prayer! 🙏

Julie K. Ageson is author of *Benedictions: 26 Reflections*, available at wipfandstock.com.

A photograph of a person with vibrant red, curly hair, wearing a teal-colored sweater. Their hands are clasped together behind their head, and they are resting their head on a light-colored pillow. The background is dark and out of focus. The title text is overlaid on the center of the image.

MEETING GOD IN GRIEF & HOPE

by Jacqueline Bussie

...s that time of year again—All Saints Day. The day carved out in the church calendar to remember all those who have died and reflect upon the gift of their lives. With each passing year, we add new names to the list of “saints” whom we mourn and celebrate. For many of us a particular name reappears, year after year, at the top of the list—the name of that loved one whose death has most deeply scarred our soul’s skin.

For me, that name is Charlotte Bussie. Charlotte Bussie, my mother, was my best friend—until the day she forgot who I was. When my mom was only 50 years old, when I was only 20, she was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease. During the next 16 years, my mother left us slowly, as if on a train traveling a millimeter a day. Until her death in 2007, I was my mom’s primary caregiver during the summers. Though I used to be too ashamed to admit it, I have not “gotten over” her death. I still often grieve.

Becoming an outlaw

During my mother’s long illness, I started thinking—a lot—about the way that tears in our culture are treated as a source of shame, embarrassment and weakness. Think about it: what do we usually say whenever we start to cry in front of someone else? “I’m sorry,” we say. Slowly, over time, I started to break this cultural “law.” I stopped apologizing for tears. I was becoming an outlaw.

I also grew dissatisfied with the cliché culture that surrounds much of Christianity. While my mother was dying, well-intentioned folks uttered adages like: “It’s all part of God’s plan” and “Everything happens for a reason.” When she finally died, they said things such as, “She’s in a better place” or “God needed another angel.” These grief clichés made me feel farther from God

than ever.

At my mother’s funeral, a church friend gave me a sympathy card inscribed with 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” Though the card was meant to comfort me, instead, it made me worry that my grief was yet another way I was failing in my faith.

You see, I believed in the resurrection and hoped against all hope that God’s arms at last drew my mom close and ended her suffering. But in all honesty, this hope did not make me miss her any less. I still grieved and struggled with feelings of anger, doubt and bewilderment. My reading of 1 Thessalonians stirred guilt into my already hot mess of struggles. I found myself asking, “Is my grief sinful and wrong? Am I guilty of grieving as one ‘who does not have hope’? How do I grieve as one who does have hope? Is it possible to grieve and have hope at the same time?” I used to worry that I was alone in these concerns, but teaching theology at ELCA colleges for the last 14 years has taught me that many people of faith wrestle with these same questions. Perhaps you are one of those people.

No clichés in Christ

To answer the question of how Christians are supposed to grieve, I returned to the Bible. When Jesus journeys to Bethany because Mary and Martha’s brother, Lazarus, has fallen ill, he arrives too late. Lazarus has already died.

“When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews... also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep” (John 11:33–35).

Re-reading the story amid my own sadness, I was

struck by this fact: Jesus cried, even though he knew he would resurrect Lazarus five minutes later. Equally remarkable? Jesus did not fill the air with clichés about why Mary and Martha and everyone should stop being sad because “it was part of God’s plan” and “God had taken Lazarus home.”

I noticed that Jesus did not instruct Mary to be ashamed of her tears. He did not tell her that her grief signaled a lack of hope and trust in God. Instead, Jesus cried with her, and was “greatly disturbed...and deeply moved” (John 11:33). Digging deeper, I discovered that a Greek word, *etaraxen*, that the NRSV Bible weakly translates as “moved,” literally means “agitated/shaken back and forth,” and thus figuratively means becoming upset, terrified or troubled. Additionally, the Greek word translated in this passage as “disturbed” literally means “to snort with anger” or “to groan with disappointment.” An accurate reading of this scripture is therefore the following: When Jesus came face-to-face-with death, he was angry, terrified, troubled, upset and deeply distressed.

The tears of Jesus

I find so much comfort and instruction in this story. Here Jesus shows us what authentic faith looks like in the real world. When confronted with the death of someone he loved, Jesus grieved his heart out and hoped like mad at the same time. He believed—and knew—Lazarus would rise again (John 11:23), but he let his tears flow anyway. He did not choose between grief and hope, nor did he force anyone else to. Jesus, in other words, shows us that grief and hope can co-exist in faithful hearts not as an either/or, but as a both/and.

Jesus’ tears reveal that even though Christians believe in redemption and resurrection, we can and

should mourn death. Jesus’ cries show us that it is okay to cry and wail our hearts out whenever and wherever the world tramples on hope’s face with its steel-toed boots. What could God be doing through Jesus’ tears besides showing us that all of our tears are legitimate and never more so than when someone has died?

The God we meet in Jesus is a God in grief. We are not alone in our grief, because God has a story of grief just like we do. The story of Jesus and Lazarus teaches

us that in our grief, when we like Mary, ask God to “come and see,” God not only shows up, but God mourns alongside us.

Contrary to expectations, the God of the cross is weak alone, afraid, misunderstood

and dying. And yet when someone says the word “God,” even Christians’ minds don’t run to any of these characteristics. Martin Luther recognized the problem and remarked that most Christians have bought into a “theology of glory” and not a “theology of the cross.” When you realize that we have forgotten all about the weak, lonely, dying and afraid parts of God’s story, it becomes less surprising that in our own stories, we forget the ways in which God accompanied us during the times when we feel the exact same way.

This All Saints Day, do not be ashamed of your tears. Remember that grief is not sinful or wrong, nor is it a sign of lost hope. Instead, grief can signify that we have learned to love God’s people as radically as God loves them—to the point of both anguish and joy. In the words of Jesus, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). 🕊

Jacqueline Bussie, Ph.D., is a religion professor at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, where she also directs Concordia Forum on Faith and Life. This essay is adapted from Bussie’s new book, *Outlaw Christian: Finding Authentic Faith by Breaking the Rules* (Nelson Books, 2016, www.outlawchristianbook.com).

DO NOT BE ASHAMED OF YOUR TEARS

REMEMBERING

ELIZABETH *of Hungary*



by Karris Golden

KATIE LUTHER. ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY. YOU.

All are bold women with ties to the Lutheran tradition and the power to make a lasting impact on the world around them, says Susan Kosche Vallem, a clinical social worker based in Waverly, Iowa.

“Individuals have to get involved; we have to do something,” Valeem explains, “Each of us can do something right where we live because there are local needs.”

While many are familiar with Katie Luther’s legacy, the contributions of her predecessor, Elizabeth of

Hungary, aren't as widely known.

Vallem discovered Elizabeth of Hungary while doing research for courses she taught at Wartburg College in Waverly. She wanted to make connections to the Wartburg Castle in Eisenach, Germany. She wondered: If many of Europe's ancient castles and manor houses once provided care for the sick and needy, did the Wartburg have such a history?

"Indeed it did," Vallem said. "In my research, I became acquainted with St. Elizabeth."

Over the years, she has continued studying Elizabeth. She's even traveled to the Wartburg Castle several times; to Elizabeth's birthplace in Bratislava, Slovakia (then Hungary); and to Elizabeth Church in Marburg, Germany, where Elizabeth died at age 24.

Vallem, throughout her career, has advocated for the rights of children, women and those with mental illnesses. She has counseled disaster relief victims. She also helped to create a comprehensive resource on ELCA advocacy and service programs. In all, she has seen the influence of Elizabeth of Hungary.

"Her life exemplifies a tradition of servant leadership," Vallem said. "In her, we can see ties to what it is that the ELCA does in response to issues of poverty, hunger justice, illness, civil rights and other issues."

Remember Nov. 17

Some details remain unknown, but Vallem sketched a biography that helps explain why Elizabeth is still celebrated with an annual Christian feast day on Nov. 17.

Born in 1207, Elizabeth was the daughter of Gertrude of Andechs-Meran and King Andrew II of Hungary.

The princess was first betrothed to Hermann and then to Ludwig IV, sons of a landgrave in the region of Thuringia and lord of Wartburg Castle. At age 4, Elizabeth was sent to live at the Wartburg, a custom that acquainted her with the family and its ways.

"In 1211, the Wartburg was a prominent place in Germany," Vallem explained. "It was headed by an intellectually gifted family and became the meeting place of poets and patrons. Topics of all kinds were freely and openly discussed. Elizabeth took part in these discussions and became well educated. Elizabeth was deeply religious as well. It was also said that, while exceptionally devout, she was very strong-willed. Elizabeth demonstrated an early concern for the poor, and her friend, Gunda, described how Elizabeth played with poor children in her young years and gave them alms."

After the death of the landgrave—and Hermann died soon after—Elizabeth eventually married Ludwig IV when she was 14 and ascended to the throne of Thuringia. While she was disliked by her mother-in-law and courtiers, according to Vallem's research,

biographers called Elizabeth's relationship with Ludwig "an idyll of enthralling fondness, of mystic ardor."

This affection is likely why Ludwig supported Elizabeth's devotion to the poor, Vallem said. Elizabeth had become interested in the teachings of Francis of Assisi and took a Franciscan brother as her spiritual mentor. The Word of the young noblewoman reached Francis, and it is said the monk spoke often of her.

"Legend has it that St. Francis willed his cloak to her when he died," Vallem said. "The young queen carried on St. Francis' concern for charity. Daily, she donned dowdy clothes as she tended the sick and needy—behavior that further isolated her from her laws and the court."

The queen was derided for flouting court conventions. According to Vallem's research, after returning from hours of charity work, Elizabeth would quickly change into royal robes so she could preside over court banquets.

Today Elizabeth of Hungary is remembered for her charitable works, with dozens of hospitals throughout

the world bearing her name. She is also associated with more than 150 miracles, most of which involve healing children.

Perhaps the most famous is the Miracle of the Roses. Elizabeth had established a hospice for the poor in a converted building at the foot of the castle hill. She smuggled bread out of the castle kitchen to feed the needy, which was forbidden. Often she'd encounter courtiers or her in-laws while carrying bread down the hill to the hospice. In those instances, she would quickly hide the food inside her robes. Once—when compelled to open her robe for inspection—legend has it that the bread turned to roses.

Elizabeth was eventually widowed and lost her position at court. Refusing to return to her father's home, she put on rags and moved to Marburg, Germany, where she dedicated herself to the Franciscan ideal of poverty.

"In every beggar and ailing person, she saw Jesus himself," Vallem said.

Once, after helping sick people in her Marburg hospital, Elizabeth is said to have exclaimed, "How happy for us to have the honor of bathing our Lord and covering him!"

Elizabeth of Hungary's desire to help and her willingness to take risks is still relatable for many modern servant-leaders, Vallem said. "She put her money where her beliefs were. She seemed to be outraged by the huge gap in resources—the hungry, poor, sick people just beyond the castle's gates. People weren't being cared for, and she thought that was scandalous. ... So she helped them. She did it herself. She didn't say, 'Let's send somebody.' ... What we profess as Christians is what she did."

Hunger today

According to ELCA World Hunger (elca.org/hunger), a tenth of the world's population is hungry—nearly 800 million people. Monetary gifts to ELCA World Hunger

support as many as 380 U.S. anti-hunger ministries and 250 programs in more than 50 countries. This includes food pantries, health clinics and job training programs.

Hunger is typically a byproduct of extreme poverty, a condition that affects 1 billion people worldwide. These individuals live on less than \$1.25 a day. In the United States, the U.S. Department of Agriculture classifies more than 19 percent of households "food insecure," and half of these include children.

ELCA World Hunger works with and through U.S. congregations and overseas partners to help communities in need. This assistance includes community meals, microloans, agricultural programs and more.

In 2015, the ELCA (elca.org/DomesticHunger-Grants) allocated nearly \$750,000 to ministries through domestic hunger grants. These funds supported 324 U.S. projects and programs devoted to hunger advocacy, development, organizing and relief. These included weekend backpack programs for children and job training initiatives.

ELCA World Hunger offers free resources for individuals and congregations, such as sermon starters, a hunger blog and a variety of educational and servant resources. In addition, there are ELCA World Hunger toolkits on a variety of topics, "Food for a Week" resources, the "Act 2Day 4 Tomorrow" middle and high school youth program kit, and more.

Support from individuals and congregations bolster ELCA World Hunger efforts and improve the impact of community programs, Vallem said.

"It takes education, outreach and advocacy," she explained. "It takes people like Elizabeth of Hungary who are willing to say, 'This isn't right. This isn't fair.'"



Karris Golden is an ELCA member, a writer and a speaker from northeast Iowa. She has written "On Faith," a weekly column for *The Waterloo Cedar Falls Courier*, since January 1999 without interruption.



the cross gets in the way

God's call was unexpected

by Violet Cucciniello Little

Like Moses leading the Israelites out of the desert and into the promised land, Drew led me to the spot in the park that would become our sacred place of worship for the next several years. "Here it is," he said, pointing to a circular formation of concrete benches. "And that's where I stay," he continued, singling out one bench.

The following Sunday, The Welcome Church—a congregation without walls primarily made up of people living on the streets of Philadelphia—held its first worship service on that same spot. A card table found in a church basement served as our communion altar.

Drew, our lector at that first service, decided not to read the lectionary texts as I had suggested, but rather chose to read ones he had practiced reading because he liked them better. Drew always carried an extra Bible in his backpack in case anyone forgot to bring theirs.

More often than not, that person turned out to be me. That's why I became concerned one Sunday when the bench on which Drew slept showed no signs of his presence. Later I would find Drew's worn blue blanket stuffed into a nearby trash can.

At the park

In spite of my attempts to find Drew, it was not until a month after his disappearance that he returned to the parkway, this time appearing in the middle of worship, after the reading of the Gospel. I acknowledged his presence and after a brief reflection on the text I opened up the sermon to the community for comment. Drew charged into the middle of the worship circle, excited to speak.

"I have a testimony," he said. Not knowing what to expect, I encouraged him to go on. Drew began unbuttoning his shirt, and I began to sweat a little. Before I could say anything, Drew revealed a large scar on the left side of his chest. Around his neck hung the bronze cross distributed and worn by many in the Welcome Church community.

"Four weeks ago, I was stabbed," he said, pointing to the scar with one hand and holding the cross with the other. "It was this cross that saved my life."

"The doctor said the knife had missed going through my heart by a fraction of an inch, but..." Drew paused, smiling. "The cross got in the way!"

Drew's words and testimony on the street nearly even years ago seemed to describe my own experience of God showing up in ways I could never imagine, let alone expect. The cross got in the way, redirecting me to places that were definitely not planned stops on the itinerary of my life's journey.

By the bus stop

Growing up female in a strong Italian Catholic family, the call to ordained ministry in the Lutheran Church

was one call the good sisters of St. Patrick's School who taught me in the late 1950s and early 1960s would definitely have blocked. But the cross got in the way. One day, while waiting for a trolley with my kids, as we explored the neighborhood where we'd just bought a house, I saw I was standing in front of a seminary. After asking another person who was waiting for the bus if he knew anything about that seminary, he walked me to the registrar's door, saying he worked at the seminary. I registered on the spot for a class as a non-matriculating student. The man who had walked my boys and me into that office was never seen again.



nor recognized by anyone. Most believe he was a patient coming from the mental health center next to the seminary. Since at the time I registered it had been at least a decade since I'd set foot inside a church, I believe it was God who showed up at that bus stop.

I remember telling my husband later that evening that I had finally signed up for a graduate class. "Social work?" he asked. (I'd been working in the field of social services and mental health up until that point.)

"No," I replied.

Before I could go any further, he guessed, "Law school—I knew it," excited by the thought that one of us might finally be making some money.

"No," I said again.

He looked confused.

"I signed up for a seminary class," I said, stunned by my own words.

Willie was quiet.

"Say something," I said, wondering if he had actually heard me.

Finally, he looked at me. "But you don't even go to church! What happened?"

I didn't have the words to express it then, but now I know: The cross got in the way.



Eight years after taking that first class as a non-matriculating student at the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia, I graduated with a Masters of Divinity. In 1992, I was called and ordained to a congregation only blocks from my home and the bus stop where I stumbled on that life-changing cross. But the cross did not stop getting in the way of my life.

In the hospital

Not long after ordination, I was diagnosed with MG (myasthenia gravis), an autoimmune neuromuscular disease that left me so weak I could barely move. After a hospitalization that lasted nearly a month, I was treated intravenously with gamma globulin, a life-saving

blood product derived from thousands of donors. As I was receiving that first infusion which would ultimately restore my strength, I envisioned all those unknown donors whose gift went into making this product. I could feel their hands holding me up. Beneath their hands, I could feel God's hands holding us all. In that moment I knew grace. Hope in a bag. God showing up, infusing me with life, the cross getting in the way, pointing me to the One who said he actually was the way and the truth and the life.

Fast forward to many wonderful years serving a congregation that I loved with an amazing co-pastor. I had family, friends and so many good things in my life. The MG was under control, but I did not drive and relied on public transportation to get me everywhere. This time it would be a train station where the cross not only got in my way, but got in my face.

At the train station

Because I relied on public transportation, I also relied on public restrooms. In a rundown restroom of a downtown train station, I first met the women who were living on the street. This was the start of what would eventually become The Welcome Church, an ELCA congregation under development. As Steve Jobs once said, "You can't connect the dots looking forward. You can only connect them looking back." Well, when I look back, I can't think of a better place than a public restroom to run into the incarnate God.

Though I had noticed the women in the restroom many times, it took a day when I was exhausted to really see the women for the first time. After a long day of work, I went into the train station bathroom and saw women washing up at the sink, changing their clothes and drying their hair under weak hand dryers. One woman's feet stuck out from under a stall where she was sleeping. I was tired, but I could go home and rest.

was tired, but I had money and identification. I was tired, but I was not carrying everything I owned. My eyes locked with one of the women at a sink. This time her half-naked body didn't force me to turn away. This time our eyes were connected in common fatigue. And my vision was forever changed.

I remembered the story of God opening Hagar's eyes in the desert, to suddenly see water that had been in front of her all along. That day, through the gift of fatigue, I saw how I was more like a woman washing up in the train station than I was different from her. In that moment of grace, the cross got in the way, and I saw that together we were part of the one body in Christ.

In donated space

There was no way around it. I had to leave what I knew and loved and take a step into the unknown. I left my congregation of 14 years. In space donated by a downtown church, I opened a place where folks could use the bathroom, rest, have a cup of tea and be called by name.

There is much more to the story of what was to become The Welcome Church. In the years that followed, not only did people share their names, many shared their hearts. Our small teatime gathering of women and men experiencing homelessness turned into a giant potluck where all were invited to bring what they had to the table with God, our host, at the center. Today The Welcome Church is a vibrant community of people experiencing homelessness, but also experiencing the hope and love of a gracious God through worship, Bible study, strong groups for women and men, a budding printing business that partners with a professional design artist, and always that table where all are invited to be and to share who they are with one another and with God.

Throughout my life, I have heard God's voice in the most unexpected places—a park bench, a bus stop,

through intravenous lines, and even in the rundown restroom of a city train station. The reality is that God speaks to all of us, in all places. When I look back, I see that the times that have seemed most unexpected have been the times I actually stopped to listen to God's call.

The cross will always get in the way of our lives. God calls us, loves and heals us during the most difficult times because Jesus promised never to leave us or forsake us. "I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus told the disciples and us. "I am coming to you" (John 14:18). And from what I hear, God keeps God's promises.



Drew no longer lives in the park. He now has his own place and helps to manage other apartments. Several weeks ago I ran into him downtown. I smiled as I saw him waving and walking toward me. He pointed to his shirt, and I saw that Drew was still wearing his cross.

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). 🌿

The Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little, child of God, serves as pastor and mission developer of The Welcome Church in Philadelphia. She is also a psychotherapist and trainer for Women of the ELCA's racial justice ministries.



FAMILY MATTERS

Church family

by Anne Edison-Albright

A congregation is not a family. We know this, and we know the problem with the metaphor: it can be exclusive, rather than inclusive. Most families are internally focused, difficult to join and fairly homogenous. Families have unwritten rules and codes that define who is *in* and who is *out*, who is *us* and who is *them*. New people coming to a congregation aren't going to immediately feel like family members, especially if they're different in some way from the tight-knit group already formed.

To all my sister daughters-in-law: How long does it take to feel truly welcomed by and part of a new family? Some families are relatively flexible and open systems; with others, you can wait a lifetime and never be *in*. Would anyone care to wait that long to feel welcomed by and part of a new congregation—uncertain if it will ever happen? Should anyone have to go through this to belong to a church?

And yet the family metaphor persists. How can it not? We are brothers and sisters in Christ, after all. It's biblical, and it reflects the truth that our bonds go beyond friendship. Christ commands that we love one another. It's probably not hard for you to think of examples within a congregation of brothers or sisters whom you might not like yet have found ways to love. If you've ever rocked someone else's baby during a sermon, you've felt the connection there, too. When that child was baptized, your congregation promised to help raise him in the faith, to make it possible for her

family to take part in worship together and to help him grow into a person who will work for justice and peace in the world. That's a deep bond—a familial bond. It's a bond that extends way beyond the walls of your congregation and mine.

Some little country churches still have half-circle communion rails. If you get a chance to kneel at one, imagine that the circle is unbroken: it extends beyond the wall and is completed by the communion of saints who gather with us around the table. I think of this cloud of witnesses often during this time of year, as we observe All Saints Day and prepare for Thanksgiving.

Marj Leegard, my appended grandma, wrote a beautiful Thanksgiving reflection for *Lutheran Woman Today* (the predecessor of *Gather*) about the empty chairs at holiday tables. I read her article when it was first published in the 1990s, and the image has stayed with me: The older you get, the more empty chairs there are around the table. The table that seemed whole to you as a child felt fractured to your grandparents. At communion, I imagine that the family circle is whole, and all the chairs at the table are full—filled with the presence of the dear ones I love and miss, like Marj, but also with saints, living and dead, whom I don't know at all. They are part of the family, too.

It's possible we could never imagine a family big enough to encompass God's family. If the congregation's conversation about family is about defining who

we are (and, by extension, who *they* are) it's going to run into trouble. This spring, at a confirmation lock-in, I heard the conversation happen in a way that was new to me.

Early in the evening, one of our readers, Jackie Zuelke-Karch, addressed a crowd of middle-schoolers: "This is going to be a family-style lock in. That means everyone here is going to help with everything, just like you did already with setting up the tables and chairs. When you see something that needs to be done, and you can do it, go for it. All of you are important for making this night a success."

Everyone there was important. Everyone's help and initiative was needed. Everyone was empowered to see what needed to be done and lend a hand. I asked Jackie about it the next day.

"It just came to me," she said. "I knew it was how it had to happen. I couldn't spend the night and this morning cleaning up after them or getting after them to do it. We had to share the responsibility, like a family."

What I love most about the interaction between Jackie and the confirmation youth is that it worked. They looked around and found ways to be helpful without being asked, throughout the night and the next morning. Jackie believed they were capable of being active in the success of the lock-in. She trusted them, equipped them and empowered them. This is why we belong to congregations: not to be passive consumers, but to have opportuni-



ties to meet people like Jackie, people who remind us that God gave us gifts, and we have something important to contribute.

The metaphor is still fraught. It's still going to send up all kinds of red flags for visitors if you say, "Our church is like a family." Much like Father, Mother or Parent language for God, if we use the family metaphor, we must struggle with the reality of lived experience: Families are not always empowering, uplifting, nurturing or safe. Neither are congregations.

And yet, there is this: We *are* family because we belong to God through Christ. We are also family because of what we are called to do: Love each other, work together for justice and peace, share our gifts and talents, and share responsibilities.

A congregation is not a family. But it is part of the family of God. 🌿

The Rev. Anne Edison-Albright is now a pastor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. This article is written with gratitude for the family of God as expressed at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

REPAIRING WHAT IS

BROKEN

by Karen Craig

knocked over a favorite vase the other day. It didn't shatter, exactly, but it broke into several pieces—most large, some small.

I didn't have time to deal with it then, so I gathered up the ceramic shards and put them inside the base—then promptly forgot about it.

I'd always liked that vase. It had a raw blackened base with a crazed white glaze overlaying it. Where the black showed through the white, it looked like nothing so much as bare winter trees, reaching toward the sky.

My 9-year-old son, Ernie, liked the vase, too, apparently. I didn't realize it until two nights ago, when, later than usual, I walked upstairs to go to bed. But Ernie had gotten to my room before me, and he was awake and waiting for me—and he was crying.

I pulled him into my arms and kissed his head. "What's wrong?" I asked him.

Ernie had pulled down the vase and tried to position the shards back into place. The curve of the vase's body held the pieces where they lay. Light from the hallway shone through the cracks. My son held my face in his hands and said, "That vase is beautiful like your poems. One day when you meet your fate, I'm going to keep your ashes in it because I love you."

Sometimes in life we're presented very suddenly with the notion of our mortality, and this was one of those times. My mind had been in a hundred places—an essay I had to write on a deadline, a job interview the next day, whether to keep the few dinner leftovers or throw them away. But now I was faced with my death.

I wasn't even sick.

I held my son and rocked him gently in my arms. I told him I loved the vase—that it was beautiful and so was his heart. I would be honored to let it receive me, although that would probably be a long time off, but to prepare for that day, I'd help him fix it. That would make it even more special, we decided—to repair it together and to care for it until it was needed.

'We can't live forever'

My son thinks a lot about mortality. He has two grandmothers, and he seems to intuitively understand the difference between them. One, a full-time mother and homemaker throughout her life, is too in love with her family and her life to even consider the possibility of death. The other, my mom, was a nurse for more than 50 years, and she has seen hundreds of deaths. She has an idea of the difference between a good one and a bad one, and she doesn't mind talking about the subject—not even where her own life is concerned.

We see her rarely, but when we do, Ernie openly inquires about her health, what it's like to be old and whether she thinks she might die one day.

My mom responds thoughtfully. "Well, you know, I've lived a nice, long life, and I've done a lot of things," she tells him. "We can't live forever."

I'm 47 years old, and I'm sorry—I think that stinks. In fact, it's nearly unacceptable.

But my son nods back at her like a sage. "I hope you make it until Christmas," he replies.

"We could have a lot of fun," Mom agrees. "I love all the lights."

Beautiful vessels

I wonder how my son and I manage to be wired so differently. Ernie thinks it's the most normal thing in the world that life winds down and ends in death, but I find it an incalculably cruel system. Ernie sees the tragedy: "I wish I could have known Grandpa Donald," he tells me sometimes, especially when I offer some insight about my father—how he liked to watch me read the Sunday funnies and would laugh at my laughing; how he had a different book by every chair and would use anything handy as a bookmark—a tissue, a candy wrapper, a smaller book.

My father was a man worth knowing, and it's not fair that he died early, and I had Ernie late. Both of my son's grandfathers died a decade before he was on

the scene, yet he talks about them very comfortably—maybe not realizing how much his father and I still (and always will) miss them.

I get the impulse behind keeping those we love near at hand—keeping them in the most beautiful vessel we can find.

Ernie tells me that my poetry is like the vase: It rises from a dark place and reaches into the sky. This reminds me of prayer. We always see prayer as going up from us—literally up, toward the heavens. And we see blessings falling down to us like summer rain. The God relationship is an up-down down: the heavenly parent, the shift supervisor, the boss. Prayers up; blessings down. We keep to our station.

I often default to this idea of prayer. In my personal theology, though—in an understanding that comes from deep inside and not necessarily from anything I've been taught—things are much more even. Although I, too, see Father/Mother God as being over us—on high—I also see God right across from me, the way I sat across from Ernie on my bed, and we talked plainly together about life and what comes after.

It's the hierarchical construction of God that compels questions about fairness. I can ask God-on-high why people have to die, and I do so with a very heavy chip on my shoulder. "It's not a system I support, God. You really messed up on that one."

But when I settle in with the God who is near—eye-to-eye—questions of fairness dissolve, and I can confront the truth of mortality. The body is a machine that both breaks and breaks down. Oxidation happens. Just as iron gives in to rust, our cells oxidize and decay. We might think of the old man in the clouds as unfair, but the rules of science seem pretty square. I have no quarrel with this one—nor with gravity, thermodynamics, inertia, Archimedes' principle, Bernoulli's principle, the law of relativity...the list goes on.

There is a great deal of comfort, especially when we lose a father or mother, in seeing God as a loving

parent who takes us into his or her arms and protects us from harm while caring for all of our needs. This feels particularly true when I was younger—uncertain about whom I was and seeking answers in all sorts of places.

But these days I take comfort in the God who is close and who made me in that perfect image. I am made of love and light, and I have faith in the everlasting source of goodness in the universe. I am grateful for a God who has promised me that whatever I need has already been given to me. In 2 Peter 1:3, we are given this assurance: "His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

The unfixable

When I was younger, I wrote a poem about regret about unfixable mistakes. It makes reference to my earlier idea of the weight of prayers, and how hard it could be to heft them up to God in heaven. (See the poem on page 25.)

Notice how I constructed a whole church—a tabernacle—around loss. I easily remember how painful it was to think of God as cold, out of reach. I don't see God that way anymore, but somehow I lack my childhood acceptance of the eventual failure of our organic shelter.

The day after our conversation about the vase, I covered the dining room table with newspaper and spread out those shards. Together, Ernie and I worked the ceramic puzzle pieces into place. We had to go slowly, gluing the edges of one piece and putting it where it belonged, then holding it in place until it began to seal.

At some point Ernie ran out of steam and headed off to do some normal 9-year-old thing, but I kept coming back to the project, testing the hold, adding another piece, setting it, letting it dry.

I doubt Ernie will remember the importance of that vase when I do, as he put it, "meet my fate." But I will always remember how he saw it as a symbol of the beauty inside me and how he thought it would be



THE MUSEUM OF THINGS YOU CAN'T FIX

True, it's not your typical museum:
butterflies with taped wings,

every manner of household appliance,
photographs of children,

unconceived.
Your mother is here, too—in the corner,

obviously suffering but making
a brave face of it.

You built this place, brick by brick,
to remind yourself of the correct spelling

of "tabernacle"—something you knew
all along, but stumbled on,

and were informed by the judges
that starting over

was against the rules.
The word is chiseled in stone

over the doorway.
In a Lucite box you'll find

that lie you told,
polished to a luster.

Above it, prayers
too heavy to float skyward

are suspended from the ceiling
by fishing line.

You have prepared a room
for someone you met too late,

and you think the recliner, the magazines
the unopened bag of chips

justify every artifact.
Invitations have been sent

to your ex-boyfriend's wife,
your dead dog,

all the strangers who got the jobs
you wanted, dignified in blue suits.

Above the strident telephone
that you never reach in time

you practice your greeting aloud.
"Welcome to my tabernacle:

T-A-B-E-R-N-A-C-L-E,
tabernacle."

a perfect receptacle for what remains when I go. The cracks add to its beauty.

The brokenness made beautiful

Once in a real museum I saw a centuries-old example of the Japanese art of *kintsugi*—"golden joinery." In *kintsugi*, broken pottery is repaired with a lacquer mixed with powdered gold, so that the fissures are not merely repaired but made beautiful, as precious metal is visible only where there was brokenness.

The memory of my father is both a broken and a golden piece of me, and so is the knowledge that my mother will one day miss seeing the Christmas lights.

None of this is unfair; it makes our time and our love all the more precious. The day will come when I'm a vein of gold in my own son's memory.

As thoughts turn toward harvest and Thanksgiving, I feel such gratitude for glue of the spiritual sort. God finds our brokenness and repairs it. God never promised to keep us from breaking, but did offer God's unbroken word that everything we need is right at hand. 🌿

Karen Craig is the author of two poetry collections, *No More Milk* and the forthcoming *Passing Through Humansville*. She maintains a daily blog on writing and creativity called *Better View of the Moon*, and she teaches English in Springfield, Missouri.



PAUL

and the power of failure

by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

Introduction

While in seminary, I took part in a program called Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a required component for ordination in the ELCA. I spent a summer working full time at a Chicago-area hospital as a student chaplain. Like every CPE student in my program, I was on call once a week for a 24-hour period. I'd spend that nervous day and night with a pager on my hip, and I jumped every time it went off. Considering that no one's physical well-being depended on my response to that pager, you'd think my fear was an overreaction. Why was I so anxious?

Luckily, I had a place to explore those questions: my CPE colleague group. It was made up of seminarians like me. All of us were preparing to become members of the clergy in our respective traditions.

In daily group sessions, our supervisor (a full-time chaplain on staff at the hospital) led us in discussions about our experiences as chaplains, how we interacted with people and reacted to them, so that we might learn more about who we were, and how we functioned in situations where we were offering pastoral care. Honesty was required, so I confessed to my stressful relationship with the pager.

With the group's help, I figured out the problem: when the pager went off, it meant my presence was needed for a situation I couldn't predict or control. No control meant I didn't know how to prepare. Without preparation, I feared I would fail. And failure was the worst result I could imagine.

My colleague, Mike, a friend since college, very gently challenged me. "I worry about you," he said. "When your expectations are always this high, what will happen when you do fail?" Chagrined, I responded that I was worse off than he imagined: I never felt I had lived up to my expectations for myself. I always feared I had failed.

In 10 years of ministry, I have had lots of practice at failing, and it has gotten easier. I've also read about many successful people who first endured significant failure: Abraham Lincoln. Thomas Edison. Albert Einstein. Walt Disney. To that list we could add the Apostle Paul, a leader in the early church, eloquent writer of letters that became essential works of the New Testament, preacher of the Gospel who gave us "saved by grace through faith" and "the greatest of these is love" and "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Paul's story, too, includes plenty of failure: a reminder

hat God, more often than not, chooses the unlikely.

REFLECT/DISCUSS When did you have a memorable failure? What did it teach you?

Better call Saul: God recruits the enemy

Then they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison (Acts 7:58–8:3).

The book of Acts tells the history of the beginnings of the church, and throughout Acts, followers of Jesus face enemies of the Gospel. One such adversary is a young man named Saul, who first appears at the stoning of Stephen—the first recorded Christian martyrdom. Perhaps Saul doesn't cast any stones himself, but he watches over the coats of those who do. (Taking off the coat, one imagines, leaves the arms of the stonewielder freer for a better throw.) Saul approves of the killing of Stephen and is inspired to embark on a personal campaign of persecution against Jesus-followers. It is an inauspicious start for the man who would come to be known as the Apostle Paul.

As Saul's actions gain notoriety, it is clear that his zeal for suppressing the Jesus movement is no secret from anyone, least of all God. God's choice to call Saul into ministry is not accidental, and in fact, it's in character. Throughout the Bible, God chooses unlikely—even morally ambiguous—people to serve and to lead God's

people. Abraham fathers a son with a servant, whom he casts out when his rightful heir is born. Moses murders an Egyptian. King David orchestrates the death of Uriah in order to marry Bathsheba. Even Jesus' chosen disciples are noted for a frequent lack of understanding, and when Jesus is taken to the cross, they fail to remain faithful. Saul—later known as Paul—is one in a long line of people whose character leads many people to wonder if God really knows what God's doing.

Admittedly, there is one obvious and immediate benefit to calling Saul: Recruiting him into ministry will end his deadly rampage against the church. But why else might God have had Saul in mind?

REFLECT/DISCUSS Why might God have chosen Saul?

Paul's unlikely ministry

[Paul said,] "While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' Then he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked, 'What am I to do, Lord?' The Lord said to me, 'Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.' Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus. "A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there, came to me; and standing beside me, he said, 'Brother Saul, regain your sight!' In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. Then he said, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.' After I had returned to Jerusalem and while

I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.' Then he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles'" (Acts 22:6–21).

Paul recounts the story of his conversion twice in the book of Acts and presumably many more times in the places where he went to proclaim the Gospel. Paul's testimony suggests to his hearers that a man as dedicated to the destruction of Christian believers as he was would never have been persuaded by a fiction. Paul's conversion is obviously genuine, and his calling to "be [God's] witness to all the world" is all the more believable for the contrast between his past and present.

Still, Paul worries that his prior career as a persecutor may set him up for failure in Jerusalem, where his past offenses are so well known that his testimony will not be welcome. "Good point," Jesus seems to say. "Let's put you on Gentiles."

Paul proves extremely successful at preaching the Gospel to Gentiles. The book of Acts details his travels, trials and triumphs: new converts, prison breaks, near-escapes, all in the name of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul leaves his stamp not only on the church, but on the New Testament as well, authoring letters that have been preserved as inspired scripture, offering wisdom for how followers of Christ are to live together in community.

In his letters—also called epistles—Paul appears confident, eloquent in encouragement and exhortation alike. However, a closer reading of Paul suggests that he struggled at times to keep the trust and confidence of some communities. Paul alludes to having an unassuming personal presence, at odds with the bold author-

ity of his writing. At one point he entreates, "I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you but bold toward you when I am away!" (2 Cor. 10:1).

Our biblical epistles only provide one side of what were two-way conversations, but it seems that in some cases, Paul's pastoral authority failed. Barbara Rossing, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, has taught that Paul's struggles are particularly evident in his letters to the church in Corinth—and that his failure there led to some of Paul's most theologically powerful writing about the nature of God's strength in human weakness.

REFLECT/DISCUSS What is the value of learning from someone who has failed?

Holy weakness, holy word

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength... When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:25, 2:1–5).

Near the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul voices an idea that will become a refrain throughout his correspondence with this community: human weakness as the means by which God's strength and power become more apparent. Paul acknowledges that during his time in Corinth, his preaching and his presence failed to impress. Lest we judge the Corinthians for their superficiality, consider how, in the U.S. presidential campaign this year, personal charisma—or its lack—played

part in the rise and fall of a number of candidates. The Corinthian church members, no doubt familiar with the Greek art of rhetoric, operate out of similar expectations.

The Corinthian church had other problems, as well, including division and factionalism. Members claimed allegiance to different preachers such as Paul, Apollos, Cephas or Christ (the last reminds me of my non-denominational friend in high school who said, “Oh, you’re Lutheran? Well, I’m Christian.”) This mix of dynamics led at least some of the Corinthians to lose confidence in Paul’s authority.

Paul cautions the Corinthians, and us, against judging anyone’s calling—including our own—by “human strength” or “human wisdom.” Rather, he suggests, we’ll get a truer picture by looking and listening beyond the surface to what lies beneath. It’s the presence of Christ within a person that should earn our trust and gain our confidence (and this presence is a free gift of God, “not our own works, lest we should boast,” Paul would also remind us.) It’s the presence of Christ within us, as individuals and communities of faith, that makes us people chosen by God for a purpose.

REFLECT/DISCUSS What “weakness” of yours, or of your congregation, might help to better reveal God’s strength and power?

‘Join, or die’: The body of Christ

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were

an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (1 Corinthians 12:12–26).

Students of American history may recall one of the earliest political cartoons, penned in 1754 by none other than Benjamin Franklin: a segmented snake, representing the various colonies, with the caption “Join, or die.” Franklin was trying to communicate the necessity and the urgency of the colonies coming together. Without unity, they would not survive.

Paul’s words to the Corinthians resemble these aims, particularly his image of the one body of Christ with many members. Paul uses this metaphor to challenge inequality and imbalances of power in the community in three ways. First, Paul addresses those who feel themselves to be less important (“If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body.”) Second, Paul turns his attention to members in the community who are claiming superior status (“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”) To strengthen this argument, Paul points out that we tend to prioritize care and protection for the most vulnerable

parts of our bodies, affording them “greater respect”; the “weaker” members of a community should likewise be given greater care. This leads to Paul’s third point: that weakness has an important purpose in the church, ensuring that “members may have the same care for one another,” suffering with those who suffer and rejoicing with those who rejoice.

REFLECT/DISCUSS What happens in a congregation when the unity of the body breaks down? How does Paul recommend that unity be found and maintained?

‘Treasure in clay jars’: Paul’s failure and its legacy

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7b–10).

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us (2 Corinthians 4:5–7).

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he is still pleading, cajoling and admonishing, in the attempt to convince the community of the truth and trustworthiness of his ministry. Neither his earlier letter nor his visits have resolved matters in a congregation that is divided among itself and ambivalent—or even antagonistic—towards Paul. Throughout the letter, Paul alter-


nates between defending his credentials and qualifications, and lamenting that he shouldn’t have to prove himself. Paul is passionate, emotional and at his wit’s end. It’s an important reminder that these “timeless” scriptures were also personal conversations between real people.

Paul may have failed, but he has not given up. Whatever his “thorn in the flesh” may be, whether his public speaking problems or something else, Paul refuses to allow this obstacle to stop him from fulfilling his calling. Paul is able to lift up his weaknesses as the very part of him in which “God’s power is made perfect.”

Hence Paul’s “treasure in clay jars”: the good news that the rougher and more imperfect the vessel, the more clearly God’s power is made visible from within. Paul’s words invite us as individuals, as congregations and as a whole church to consider how we may also serve as “clay jars,” to be filled with the Gospel and to share it in a way that points to God and not to us.

If Paul had been more “perfect,” what would the church have become? Without Paul’s scandalous past, the flaws and weaknesses of his ministry, and even his failures, what understanding of the power, strength and wisdom of the Gospel might have been lost? Even today, God’s unlikely choice of Paul still bears witness through his words to the good news. May we also trust and believe that God chooses us, and that even when we fail, the light of Christ shines brightly through the cracks.

Prayer

Faithful God, as you called Paul, so you call us. Free us from fear of failure and make us unashamed of our flaws and weaknesses. For your power is made perfect in weakness: through the cross, through your church and through each one of us, in the name of the one whose body we are: Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. 

The Rev. Meghan Johnston Aelabouni is a full-time Ph.D. student and mom to three.

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PAUL

and the power of failure

by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

No one on earth would ever have looked at Paul's résumé and thought, "apostle." In fact, no one on earth did! But God chose Paul, a man with a dubious past and a shaky present, to lead and guide the early church into the future. How can Paul's failings help us to come to terms with a God who chooses the unlikely—including you and me?

Introduction

Last fall, I applied for several Ph.D. programs at schools around the country. For three months, I filled out applications, updated my résumé, collected transcripts, asked for references and wrote essays describing why I would be a good candidate for each program. By the end, it felt as if I had put my whole life and self on the line asking, "Accept me...please?" It was a great and challenging exercise in vulnerability.

As I waited to discover whether a program would admit me, I kept telling myself that I would be fine either way. No matter what happened, I was blessed with an amazing vocation as pastor to a great community of faith—not to mention a full-time job as a spouse and a mother to three kids! And yet each time I received a rejection (and they were mostly rejections), I started to doubt whether teaching was really my call-

ing. I wondered whether I was really good enough.

Have you ever felt like someone is judging your whole life to decide whether you are worthy? It could be applying for a new job or program, going through the selection process to be a foster or adoptive parent, undergoing medical testing, performing, sharing art or writing, or simply getting up in front of your congregation to speak.

Lutheran Christians believe and teach that every baptized Christian has a *vocation*, a calling from God that gives us a purpose in everything we do: in work, in church, in community, in relationships. Too often, however, self-doubt can keep us from fulfilling our vocation. *I'm not as good at this as I should be*, we may think, or *how can I live up to these expectations? They'll figure out I'm faking it*. I've read articles lately that put a name to this feeling of perpetual self-doubt: "imposter syndrome."

I don't know if you've noticed, but the Bible is filled with stories of imperfect and deeply flawed people who were chosen by God for important work. So many of our role models of faith are the last people anyone would expect God to choose—and I believe that's intentional. It shows us that God doesn't judge us by the caliber of our résumé. Our vocation isn't dependent

on proving to God and others that we're good enough. We're called to be faithful, not perfect. How might this understanding guide your group's discussion of Paul and your own vocations?

Prepare

A quick Google search on "famous failures" can offer numerous examples of well-known leaders, artists, athletes and scientists who experienced significant failures. Consider printing out one or more examples to bring to the Bible study.

As you prepare to lead this discussion, spend some time reflecting on how you would answer some of the questions in the study. Confessing past or present failures or fears takes vulnerability and courage. Sharing your own stories could lead the way.

Gather/Opening prayer

God, how could you call such imperfect people—and how could you call me? You know our fear of inadequacy and failure keeps us from so much. It keeps us from full and joyful life in your service. Help us to remember and trust that your power is made perfect in weakness, especially in the situations we now name aloud or silently... *(Pause to allow group members to name situations, such as illness, job loss, divorce, family conflict, moving to a new home, etc.)*

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Study

In addition to the study discussion and questions, consider drawing from additional background information on the apostle Paul—your church library might have articles, books or videos on Paul.

One of my favorite "sermons" on the themes in this study isn't a sermon at all, but a 2011 TED talk called "The Power of Vulnerability," offered by researcher Brené Brown (search the name and title on YouTube.) If your group has time and the means to watch this 20-minute video, it's worth it.

Another addition to this study could be inviting your group to complete a spiritual gifts assessment (find one by searching "spiritual gifts" at womenoftheelca.org).

Wrap-up

Before the closing prayer, consider giving each group member a piece of paper to make three lists: strengths (God-given gifts and talents), weaknesses (flaws or challenges) and vocations (the roles and relationships to which each of us is called by God.) After a time of discussion or silent reflection, invite each member to write down or name aloud one way that God could work through their strengths *and* weaknesses as they live out their callings.

Closing prayer

Go in peace!

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Resilience

THE STICKINESS TO KEEP GOING *by Julia Seymour*

If we had real stories about Jesus as a little boy, what would they be like?
The stories that do exist were written hundreds of years after his life, death and resurrection.

So we have no stories from eyewitness—reliably passed down or
widely accepted—that tell us what the little boy who was
fully human and fully divine was like.



Did he make extra snacks when he was out with his friends? Did he intuit who needed a scrape healed or a kind word? Did he play with everyone or stick with those he knew, heeding his parents' warnings and teachings?

The thing I most want to know is did he get miracles right the first time? When he learned the Torah stories, were they already familiar to him, with understanding flowing forth from the eternal part of his being, which had witnessed all these things as the living Word?

In modern Western parenting, social, psychological and educational goals aim to help children have resilience, perseverance and grit. Grit is the ability to buckle down and focus on a long-term goal or many goals. Perseverance is the stickiness one needs to keep going, trying and experimenting with life, work and play. Resilience is the ability to keep going after a mistake or three.

Did the child Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, need these three things? Where are these things in other Bible stories or characters, so that we may point them out to our children and help them learn these skills as faith practices that can be applied to their everyday life?

GOD-GIVEN TOOLBOX

"Child of God, you are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever." These words, said at a baptism, remind all who hear that the newly baptized have now been dressed in Christ and bear the sign of his cross. This is the uniform and toolbox for all Christians, regardless of age at baptism. The Holy Spirit keeps these gifts renewed in us, so that they are ever as fresh as the day we received them.

The reality of being a child of God comes fully to us in our baptism. It is not something we have to grow into or something we can outgrow. We do not need new skills, knowledge or abilities to make it efficacious or to jumpstart it into action at a certain age. Once we

have received the gift of baptism, we have all we will ever need. The congregation, surrounding sponsors, our families and friends always promise to help us learn how to use that toolbox.

We do not expect anyone to know how to use a sewing machine, a table saw, a pressure cooker, a power washer or computer the first time they see them. It takes resilience to learn how to use any of those tools. Mistakes will be made. Most adults understand the concept of "try, try again" when using tools, but sometimes it's harder to apply that principle to our life in faith. When we don't, children who are watching us (and to whom we have promised to teach the faith) do not learn resilience, perseverance or grit in their spiritual practice. They have received the tools, but they need help to use them.

'IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...'

"Mommy, my tummy hurts," my six-year-old said as our plane began to taxi toward the runway.

"What kind of hurt?" I replied. "Do you feel like you need to go potty or is it something else?"

"Something else. It feels funny." He squirmed in his seat but wouldn't meet my eye.

I raised an eyebrow, "Are you nervous?" He nodded.

We talked again about the rarity of plane crashes, about safety and about the fact that we were together. We held hands and touched foreheads. As his shoulders relaxed, I asked if he'd like to pray.

His eyes widened, "No! Everyone will hear."

Yes, I suppose when your mom prays in public for a living, you might forget that she could be quiet as well. I grinned, "We can pray quietly here in the seat. No one except you, me and God will hear it. Would you like me to just say the words, or would you like to say some by yourself or after me?"

"After you."

We prayed quietly in our seats for a safe flight and

a settled tummy. We gave thanks for the pilots' skill, the chance to take a trip and God's love. We said our amens and hugged each other.

This was not merely a routine to curb airsickness or to offer empty comfort. By taking his concerns seriously and listening fully, we were able to take steps that were in our hands and turn over the rest to God's hands. Part of resilience is learning that life has turbulence, and we are not at its whim. We are fully able to act and to trust God to act in love as well.

Many people blanch at the idea of praying out loud. Yet prayer is one of the major tools that comes with being a child of God. Helping children craft simple prayers teaches them that they, too, can talk to God, expect to be heard, and be reassured that their concerns and requests are valid. Prayer can and should develop along with a child's development. As writing and reading skills improve, so can prayer. Asking a child to pray at a meal (beyond a memorized prayer), offer thanks for a good day, or pray for you in a certain task will help to grow perseverance in prayer and resilience that builds on baptism's foundation.

In addition to prayer, reading the Bible, acts of service and participation in a faith community require practice, practice and practice. Not every attempt at a project is going to work the first time. Even more likely, the project may work but not have the intended or hoped-for result. Yet the Holy Spirit still renews our toolbox, so we can go forth and attempt God's work again with our hands, feet, mouths and resources.

FAITH FAILURES, FAITH HEROES

Abraham passed his wife, Sarah, off as his sister not once but twice. This endangered her, as well as others traveling with them. Esau sold his birthright for stew. Esther lost her nerve at the first banquet she threw and had to have another in order to plead for the lives of the Jewish people, her people. Jeremiah lamented. The disciples hid in fear in the upper room after the

resurrection. Thomas doubted, Peter denied and Mary Magdalene believed the body of her Lord was stolen, not resurrected.

Our Bible knowledge often comes through compressed-for-comprehension stories, which either appear in an illustrated Bible for children or in a pericope, a Sunday reading for adults. Reading for context and thinking about what's not said matters. The people in biblical stories had feelings, thoughts and reasons for their reactions. Talking out what was said and left unsaid communicates the resilience, grit and perseverance of these human characters. Seeing these traits alongside their faithfulness (or lack thereof) in God helps modern Bible readers like us to grasp the truth that is in these stories.

We may not have stories of Jesus as a little boy or in his teens. We know that, as an adult, he wept at his friend's death, he raged against injustice, he was moved by compassion and he welcomed children to him for blessing and for their ministry. Even without knowing what he was like before his public ministry, we can assume that in those years he learned a kind of resilience, grit and perseverance that helped him move forward, even as his life was threatened and then taken.

Regardless of our ages, all children of God need to be reminded again and again that we have received a complete toolbox of faith skills through our baptism. This is the work we do with those skills: living among God's faithful people, proclaiming Christ through word and deed, caring for others and the world God made, seeking to know Christ through God's Word, growing in faith and living the Christian life. That work takes practice. The more children see the adults around them practicing these things—including admitting to failure—the more resilient they will become, trusting in God and in God's work and love in those around them.

The Rev. Julia Seymour serves Lutheran Church of Hope in Anchorage, Alaska.

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EARTH WISE

People of soil, seed and abundance

by Venice Williams

My ancestors were people of soil and seed. They were people who cultivated the earth and the plants that sprouted from it.

Mine is a Choctaw ancestral legacy where family garden plots were planted in March with small and large varieties of beans, quick-ripening corn and other vegetables. Opening the earth and planting seeds were very spiritual acts which, combined with adequate rain and sunlight, would do nothing less than provide food to sustain the community through the next year. I am told that in March my Choctaw ancestors also planted a pumpkin patch with not only pumpkins but melons grown from seeds obtained from Africans. Located some distance from the village, the patch was a prime target for hungry birds and mammals.

To help keep hungry wildlife away from crops, my ancestors built six-foot platforms during the growing season. The women would create a rotation schedule, taking turns sitting on these platforms during the day, weaving baskets, mending clothing, crafting household tools and scaring away birds or animals that tried to enter the patch. They watched over the earth, the vegetation and one another.

Come the month of May, my ancestors planted large communal fields. This was at a time when the woods had plenty of wild edibles to attract birds and other animals away from the community's crops. A male elder and village leader would decide which day the villagers would begin the work in the communal field. Since this field fed everyone, all

were required to help with the planting.

Anyone capable of planting, who refused to do their share, was asked to leave the village.

The backbone of the community fields was corn, neatly planted in hills that formed rows spaced one yard apart. The people planted squash, watermelons and sunflowers in the spaces between the cornrows. They obtained beans and peas, with seeds once again obtained from Africans, and planted these as well. Unlike the family garden patches, the large community fields were for the benefit of the whole community.

My ancestors were people of soil and seed. They respected the Earth and honored the richness of the land. They had a spiritual and agricultural rhythm of living with and on the Earth that existed long before Europeans ever "discovered" the land and disrupted their way of life.

My ancestral legacy is also an African one, of nomadic Fulani people who raised cattle and moved around in search of green pastures. Mine is also a cultured African ancestry of growing cotton, rice, indigo and tobacco that contributed to the wealth of the Americas.

Throughout the generations, in both the southern and northern nooks and crannies of this country, I've had the African-Choctaw legacy of farming pumpkins, sweet potatoes, okra, purple hull peas, brown Crowder peas, black-eyed peas, green cabbage, cucumbers, mustard and collard greens, millet, parsley, sage and spearmint. Their farming fed and nourished family, neighbors,

ages and communities. And at all times, with each and every harvest and meal, we gave thanks to God.

My ancestors were people of soil and seed. I grew up well-fed, completely loved and oh so nourished through the cultivation and preparation of food. I would come to a vibrant table where family members shared homespun meals and the details of the day's journeys. My family understood what spiritual writer, Macrina Wiederkehr so eloquently put into words: "The earth is a mother. Her soil has soul. She blesses each seed that is sown, and the seed becomes a song. From the altar of her womb we are fed."

Now we have entered the time of year where we feed one another out of an abundance of food and faith, where we give thanks. We have entered that season where the harvest overflows, and for most of us, there is always more than enough. We have entered the time of year where we remember anew that we are called to share the harvest with those who are hungry.

I often picture the women of my ancestral lines reaping what they have sown. I can see them toting baskets of pumpkins, melons, hardy greens and the last of the corn. I imagine them singing songs and retelling stories. They do not harvest alone. The rest of the village joins them. And always, they give thanks.

I carry these images with me this autumn, as I harvest acorn squash, collard and kale greens, turnips, fennel bulbs, peanuts and the last of my sweet potatoes. This harvest will be shared

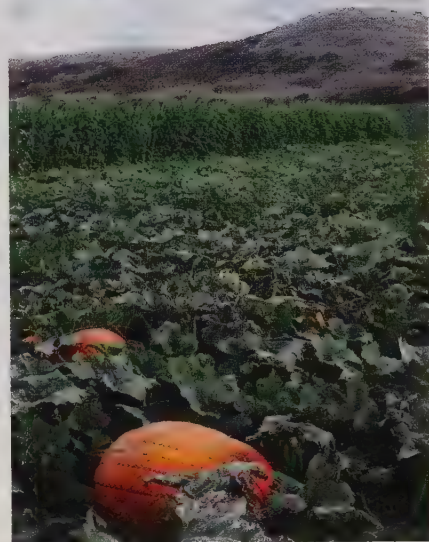
with family and friends. Our gratitude will have a rippling effect of all that is good, at each and every table where that gratitude is shared.

To be alive is to be in a relationship with the land. To be alive is to be in communion with the cultivation of food. For me, being fully alive means constantly nurturing the relationship between food, faith and community. As Wiederkehr says "from the altar of [the Earth's] womb we are fed"—fed beyond measure.

This season of harvest and thanksgiving is about bringing everyone back to the table of abundance. It's about humanity together finding a path back to vibrant tables that nourish our bodies and our souls. What better time could there be to do this than November, when we are most intentional about giving thanks? What better time than when the bounty of autumn is overflowing with hues of orange, deep greens and vibrant purples, all coming from the good brown earth? What better people to set tables of welcome from the altar of the Earth's womb than you and me?

Let us all be people of soil, seed and abundance. 🌻

Venice R. Williams is executive director of Alice's Garden Urban Farm and The Body and Soul Healing Arts Center, both in Milwaukee, Wis. She is also the developer of a new ELCA worshipping community called The Table, a 1st century-style church in the 21st century.



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GRACE NOTES

Solar power meets soul-ar power

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



I'm sharing a mission

story with you this month, with an invitation for you to help bring solar power to Phebe Hospital in rural Liberia.

Two friends from Northeastern Minnesota traveled to Liberia in 2012 with the 25th anniversary tour sponsored by the churchwide organization of Women of the ELCA. While in Liberia, they visited Phebe Hospital, one of the best hospitals in rural Liberia with an excellent nurses' training program. Like most of Liberia, Phebe suffered greatly during the country's long-running civil war. The country's infrastructure was destroyed and may never be rebuilt. The electrical grid is gone, and power comes from generators, if it's available at all.

The women wondered about the possibility of solar power. Could the hospital collect solar power and run on that? When they returned to Minnesota, they did some research and met with a local company. It turns out that solar energy would save Phebe about \$35,000 a month—the amount the hospital spends on diesel fuel to run five generators. They decided to bring a resolution to the June 2013 convention of the Northeastern Minnesota Synodical Women's Organization ("SWO"). In that resolution they asked the SWO to provide financial support to make the dream of solar power for Phebe Hospital a reality.

The bold women at that synodical convention—not unlike you who read this now—read that resolution, prayed on it and adopted it. They sent that memorial on to the Ninth Triennial Convention

(2014) of Women of the ELCA and asked the whole women's organization to get behind this project. The triennial convention voted in support and asked the Northeastern Minnesota SWO to keep informing the churchwide women's organization about the progress of this project.

Now from the initial stirrings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of two women, we have women throughout our organization supporting the effort to bring solar power to Phebe Hospital. Offerings have been gathered and sent. At least two synods took action at synod assemblies, and the matter was sent on to the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

As of June 30, 2016, \$145,364.79 had been raised toward the goal of \$624,000.

National Geographic has awarded the project a \$100,000 grant through its Great Energy Challenge. The conditions of the grant require that the project be completed by September 2017. To accomplish that, the remainder—approximately \$378,635—needs to be raised by December 31, 2016.

After you've made your year-end gift to Women of the ELCA, will you consider making an additional gift to the solar energy project for Phebe Hospital? Make a gift online at skipthegrid.org or mail checks to NE MN Synod, ELCA, 1105 E Superior St., Duluth, MN 55802 (note "Phebe" on the memo line).

Thank you. Your generosity really makes a difference in people's lives. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

In the eyes of the beholder

by Catherine Malotky

This weakness thing is tricky, God. Like that old idea, “wounded healer,” it can be great until the wound becomes wounding. Your power is made perfect in weakness, as the apostle proposed, but maybe this perspective is an invitation into the subtleties of power rather than a rejection of it.


As a female, I am accustomed to thinking of myself as the “weaker” sex. What if it’s all in your point of view? Usually strength is seen as a burst of power, but what of endurance as another kind of power? What about the power of a birthing mother, bearing the arduous task of moving that little one from the inside to the outside of her body? Certainly the demand of giving birth is visited upon a mother, but it is her body’s energy and her spirit’s commitment that empowers her to surrender to this holy, hard work. In fact, her ability to give herself to the task is precisely what makes her strong.

So who was more powerful, Stephen or the stoning mob? Stephen’s mindful prayer of forgiveness or Saul’s inciting words to those around him? We usually see bullies as powerful and, in fact, their ability to “overpower” or inflict emotional wounds is indisputable. But think of the young African Americans who first refused to leave a segregated lunch counter in 1960 or Rosa Parks, who remained in her bus seat in 1955. Were the children of Birmingham, knocked to the ground by fire hoses and savaged by dogs in 1963, weak or strong?

In our day, we certainly see wealth

as power. Money is a powerful currency in our culture, an influencer that invites favor. But it also creates powerful vulnerabilities and, for those who hear the calling to do good, a responsibility to stand through the fawning approval that often accompanies it. It can be too easy to hide behind privilege, to hide within walls of communities, to buy insulation from the pain and ambiguity of life. Think of the power of those who extend hospitality in spite of what looks like scarcity, though they are the “victims” of economic bullying because of color or IQ or family of origin or any of the many ways we marginalize our brothers and sisters.

What kind of strength does it take to be patient rather than lash out? What kind of strength does it take to negotiate rather than claim all rights to the more noble vision? What kind of strength does it take to be crucified for the sake of God’s promise to bring life out of death?

Jesus, perhaps strength is more nuanced than brute power over. Perhaps strength is about endurance and commitment, patience and hope. Perhaps strength in your economy is more about the greater good than my own aggrandizement, and more about the wellbeing of the whole creation than only my own corner of it. Give me the courage to seek your way, God, to hear your call, to surrender to the power of life-giving. In Jesus’ name. Amen. 

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as director of development. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher and retreat leader.

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